

Govt Healthcare

More Rhetoric than Real Action

Deep Azad writes from Khulna

The government with help from the USAID has opened thousands of Green Umbrellas to reach better healthcare to the rural poor. Many are still left uncovered by the umbrellas.

or other spiritual healers not medical doctors can help them.

Doctors are also not available when patients need them. Also there are not enough doctors at the health centres. This is another factor that discourages women to visit the health centres.

Women are too shy to discuss these diseases with the men in their families. They feel more at home with the spiritual healers, many of them women. The spiritual healers are always nice to their patients. Women feel at ease to discuss their problems in details with them," said Rafiqul Islam, a development worker in the area.

At Srifaltala village in Rampal thana this correspondent spoke with Rahima, 27-year-old wife of a day labourer, mother of two children, one eight years old and the other two years. Despite poverty the family was doing fine until last year when Rahima started complaining about terrible headache and her poor eyesight.

In just few months she became irregular in menstruation. Rahima, who used to work in a shrimp farm, went to a spiritual healer who diagnosed her as having a problem with her womb.

The quacks are more friendly to the women. That's why Green Umbrellas are still not popular," he said. The quacks and spiritual healers are flexible in their fees. So treatment is much cheaper.

Medical doctors, according to some patients interviewed by News Network, prescribes costly medicines. On the other hand the quacks fix their fees

considering how much an individual patient can afford to pay. Thus the fee could be Tk. 20 for one patient, but for another Tk. 10 only. Those who are too poor to pay can get it free.

Quacks, herbal and spiritual healers are in plenty in the area. There are more than 150 of them in 10 unions of Rampal thana, 10 of them women. Among the women spiritual healers Nurj Bou is doing very well. No one knows what her real name is, but people come to her for relief. She charges only Tk. 21 from each of the patients. She describes the fees as "fine" for wrongdoing. She breathes into a pot of water that patients are asked to drink or prescribes talismans.

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as a victim of an evil spirit. "The ozhal spiritual healer told me I came across the evil spirit while working in the shrub field," she said.

The spiritual healers are successful only in a few cases. But that is enough to sustain their reputation because the illiterate women want to trust them. Muslim Fakir of Sadar union, Shafiqul Islam of Rajnagar union and Khaque Moulana of Gouranga union are among the most sought after kabirajis in the area.

Government health workers are still not able to match the traditional healers.

"There are more rhetoric than real action in the government health sector. They promise tall but money available in the sector is too small to reach the poor patients," said a government health worker, speaking on condition he can't be identified.

Green Umbrella is part of the National Family Planning and Mother and Child Care Strategy of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The seven-year (1993-2000) strategy aims to reach basic health care to the rural poor and raise the contraceptive prevalence rate.

At present 77,000 health and family planning workers — 17,000 of them from voluntary agencies — are out in the villages.

None of them has yet crossed the path of Namita Rani Karmakar who goes to a traditional healer whenever she becomes ill.

— News Network

Health Hazards from Pollution

by Durga Ray

VIRAL hepatitis affects six million people in the Indian subcontinent annually, a third of whom contract it from contaminated water. In New Delhi, mother's milk contains 46 times more of the deadly pesticide DDT than it is safe.

These were some of the more alarming revelations turned up by leading environmentalists and health experts at a three-day national conference held in New Delhi.

The conference on 'Health and Environment', the first of its kind in the country, was organised by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). Exposing the massive gaps in the system, the conference stressed better monitoring and surveillance of environmental conditions and human health.

The Road to Reason at Fraser's Hill

A road scheme in the Malaysian highlands threatens one of the country's most beautiful and sensitive areas. Among its key functions is the education of a new generation about the vital role environmental protection plays in their lives.

by Leyla Alyanak Malaysia

THE wildlife reserve known as Fraser's Hill in Peninsular Malaysia is one of the country's most beautiful and popular hill stations. At 1,300 metres above the sea, these highlands are home to a quarter of Malaysia's plant species, 260 bird species and more than 1,200 species of orchid. Fraser's Hill and the other two highland resorts in the area attract more than 600,000 visitors a year.

Among those visitors are groups of young people brought to a WWF — World Wide Fund For Nature — Malaysia nature education centre where they are shown in practical terms how their environment is vital to their survival.

"We try to give them hands-on experience," says Tan Fong Kew, education officer for WWF-Malaysia. "We teach them to be observant by playing games, and to notice the relationships between things around them. Too often, people take their environment for granted."

Taking nature for granted is precisely what WWF wants to avoid and Fraser's Hill wildlife reserve is the perfect place to start. In addition to its sheer natural beauty, the 5,000-kilometre Main Range is the most important water catchment area for Peninsular Malaysia and the source of many rivers.

Noorhayatul Nufus and

TOM & JERRY

I SEE YOU AT THAT POSH, NEW FRENCH RESTAURANT. YOU ARE...

DIST BY ASIA FEATURES

STUFFING BLEU CHEESE INTO YOUR MOUTH WITH BOTH HANDS, WOMEN ARE RUNNING AND SCREAMING.

OH, EXCUSE ME, MY CRYSTAL BALL SEEMS TO BE FOCUSED ON THE MOUSE IN THE CORNER.

LOOKS LIKE PIERRE'S FOR TONIGHT.

4-23

By Hanna-Barbera

IAN FLEMING'S

James Bond

DRAWING BY HORAK

NO BUT IT'S A SAFER PLACE TO SIT DOWN FOR THE MOMENT. YOU CAN REGISTER AT AN HOTEL LATER...

JACK NGUVU, MI-6 AGENT IN GHANA, HAS MET BOND AND DAMARA CARRIER AT THE AIRPORT IN ACCRA...

THIS DOESN'T EXACTLY LOOK LIKE A TOURIST HOTEL!

FIRST I WANT TO HAVE A LOOK INSIDE THE OMAR TRADING COMPANY OFFICE — TONIGHT!

A SMALL BURGLARICUS OPERATION, I PRESUME?

NO BUT IT'S A SAFER PLACE TO SIT DOWN FOR THE MOMENT. YOU CAN REGISTER AT AN HOTEL LATER...

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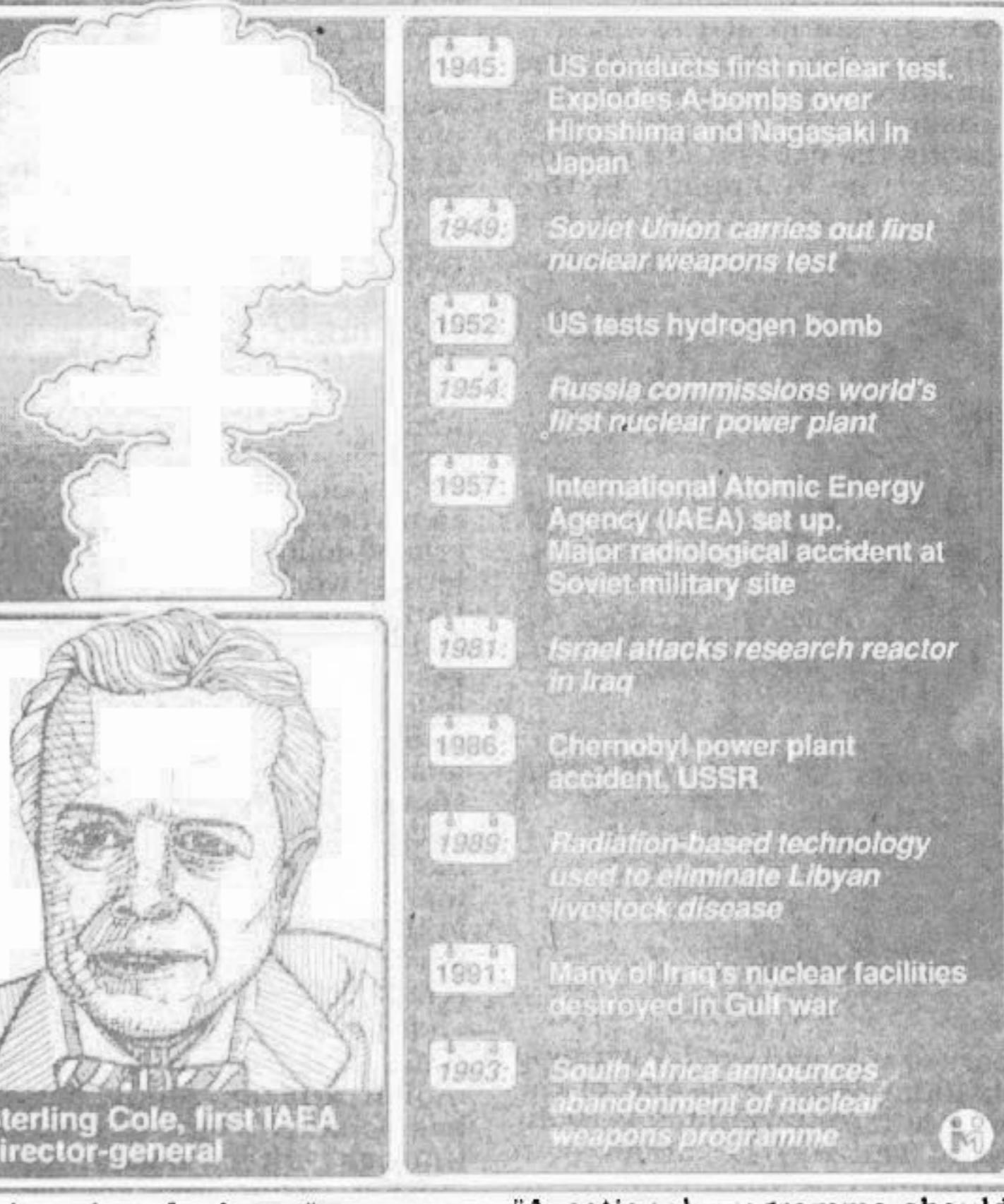
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Buddha's Nuclear Smile Turns to Radioactive Tears

The recent atomic tests by India and Pakistan have alarmed their smaller neighbours. Gemini News Service reports on concern in Nepal over the potentially damaging consequences of increased nuclear activity in the region, including environmental contamination and meteorological and seismic instability.

Prakash Khanal writes from Kathmandu

Atomic clock



and nuclear facilities."

He wants Nepal to undertake its own monitoring programme, a plea echoed by Dr Shrestha, who called for the immediate establishment of a task force of nuclear physicists, chemists, biologists and food specialists. Their job would be to formulate a plan to measure radiation levels in the air, water, soil and food in residential areas and in the Himalayas.

"It may take us 20 years, but we should begin now," he said.

"A national programme should be included in the forthcoming ninth five-year development plan and we should chalk out five to 25-year programmes, step by step."

Dr Shrestha, who has outlined his plans in a report to the ministry of population and environment, pointed out that Nepal's neighbours had nuclear weapons sites at Lop Nor in western China, at Pokhara in India and in the Chagai hills in Pakistan.

Fortunately, since 1973 the testing of nuclear weapons had been carried out underground only, not on the surface, in the atmosphere or under water.

However, Dr Shrestha stressed: "The problem has reached our doorstep, so we must take the first step."

There was a real possibility of contamination by harmful levels of radiation, "so we should get ready to meet such challenges".

And the first step, he and many scientists agree, is to join the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear body. One benefit of this might be assistance with acquiring monitoring devices. Nepal has virtually none of its own.

Sophisticated equipment was in place to monitor China's 1973 tests, but was subsequently taken back by the Belgian laboratory with which Nepal was cooperating in a joint project.

Another past monitoring programme, the Himalayan Meteorological and Environment Research Expedition, run in conjunction with Japanese scientists, collected evidence of some radioactivity and seismic effects in Nepal from China's nuclear tests.

Another issue has been raised by Dr Tika Karki, director of the National Food Research Laboratory in Kathmandu — the need to keep a check on imports of food from India that might have been contaminated by radiation.

He described it as a big challenge, saying: "We faced enough such problems after the accident at Chernobyl (nuclear power station in Ukraine) in 1986. This time there is also a risk, so monitoring and measuring the level of nuclear radiation of food items would be a timely step."

The writer is a freelance Nepalese journalist.

Beauty and Biology: The Shangri-La

by Richard Mahapatra

The forest cover in Sikkim in 1988 was 50 per cent of the land area and by the mid-1990s it was down to 44 per cent. Currently it stands at 36.3 per cent, according to N C Shenga of the Sikkim Forest Department.

THE children of Sikkim only get to see their state's flora and fauna preserved on light-sensitive paper — photographs taken in the early part of the century by the British. And if conservation activity is not speeded up, even the existing species may vanish — remaining on paper alone.

The Gazetteer of Sikkim, published in 1928, remains the only comprehensive source of information on flora and fauna. Compiled from studies conducted by British travellers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it identified over 200 mammals, some 2,600 species of butterflies and moths, and 550 birds — accounting for nearly 30 per cent of the entire bird population of India, Pakistan, India, Bhutan and Sri Lanka combined.

The small state is home to some 5,000 flowering plants and trees, and 400 non-flowering plants like ferns, lichens, liverworts, algae and fungi. About 2 per cent of these are found exclusively in Sikkim. But most of them are now on the decline.

Flowering plants like gladiolus, primula, potentilla, iris, gentian, anemone and orchids thrive in Sikkim. Rhododendrons grow profusely on the Singalila range, bordering Sikkim and Nepal. But these flowers dominating whole hillsides, which blush in shades of pink, orange and red, may soon turn rare for lack of sound cultivation.

After a weekend close to nature in the highlands, at least some young people will have a better understanding of the vital connection between themselves and their environment. This is the first step in sensible development.

Where will you go if the air keeps getting worse?" WWF's Tan Fong Kew asked the students at Fraser's Hill. With a thick, slimy haze hanging like a grey cloud over the capital, Kuala Lumpur, the highlands are one of the few avenues of escape. "If these are destroyed, where will you run to?"

Good question.

The highlands have won an unexpected — if temporary — reprieve. The recent fall in the value of Malaysia's currency forced the government to rethink several of its projects, including the highland road, and some observers suggest that what was economically feasible

five years ago may no longer be so. The government insists the project has merely been postponed, but WWF hopes decision-makers will take this opportunity to re-examine the road's overall feasibility. As the authorities already know, road building in Malaysia can be full of surprises.

The East-West highway, which links the coasts across the Main Range, is an example of what can go wrong when things are not thought through. In 1991, inspectors found 151 erosion-prone areas along the highway. The repair cost US\$6 million.

WWF stresses it is not fundamentally opposed to development. "What is needed is careful review and monitoring of any form of land use in the highlands," said Sabri Zain. "Whether it is a new resort development, road building, or agriculture, we have to identify where it is in the highlands it should take place and where it should not."

But all of this could end if developers have their way. A proposed plan to link this and two other hill resorts by a road over the mountains has upset conservationists.

The road would be an unspeakable environmental catastrophe," said Sabri Zain, a

spokesperson for WWF-Malaysia. "not only for the highlands, but for the country as a whole."

The proposed road would cut through water catchment areas,

threatening Malaysia's water supply.

WWF is not the only group to be concerned. The Malaysian government has also expressed concern about the proposed road.

But the road is likely to be built, despite opposition from environmentalists.

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